The Golden Rule of Apologetics Part 1

September 16, 2008 By Kenneth R. Samples <http://www.reasons.org/articles/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-1>

As a teacher at my church and as a professor at a university I find it much easier to talk about Christian ethics than to live them out in daily practice. I am sure that I am not alone in that human experience. It is a great comfort that the historic Christian faith is a religion of divine rescue rather than one of self-help salvation.

Yet Christianity involves not just a set of beliefs but also a collection of moral values. According to the Christian world-and-life view, right belief (orthodoxy) must be married to right action (orthopraxy). And one of the clearest and most practical ethical principles found in Scripture is known as the “Golden Rule.” From the mouth of Jesus Christ himself:

**So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**

According to Jesus, the greatest commandment in the Law of God is loving God with your entire being (heart, mind, soul, and strength) and loving your neighbor as yourself ([Mark 12:28-31](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2012:28-31&version=31)). Jesus informs us in his teaching that treating others as you would like to be treated effectively summarizes this greatest of commandments.

Still, as a confirmed sinner, I can (at best) merely strive to keep these pristine moral ideals. Fortunately, the “good news” (gospel) of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ has perfectly kept the Law of God in my stead and makes it possible for me to have right standing (forgiveness and acceptance) before a holy and just God ([Acts 13:39; Romans 5:1; Galatians 2:16](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2013:39;%20Romans%205:1;%20Galatians%202:16&version=31)). In my own theological tradition (Reformed), we view the believer’s imperfect attempt to keep the Golden Rule as an appropriate and necessary act of gratitude to God for his gracious act of redemption (see [*The Heidelberg Catechism*](http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html), Part 4).

**The Golden Rule in Apologetics**

Since the Golden Rule applies to every action, that includes the critical enterprise of Christian apologetics. The word *apologetics* is derived directly from the New Testament (Greek: *apologia,* [1 Peter 3:15](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%203:15&version=31)) and may be defined as the branch of Christian theology that seeks to provide rational justification for the truth-claims of Christianity. In other words, apologetics is how Christians go about defending their faith ([Acts 17:2-4; 22-32; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Jude 3](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2017:2-4;%2022-32;%202%20Corinthians%2010:5;%20Jude%203;&version=31;)).

But how does the Golden Rule impact apologetic engagement? It applies in that believers need to treat nonbelievers the way they want to be treated. This includes treating other people’s beliefs, viewpoints, and arguments the way you want yours to be treated.

The Golden Rule’s application means that Christians should operate according to the highest standards of intellectual integrity. Our enterprise of defending the faith should be characterized by honesty, fairness, civility, and charity. In fact, in philosophical discourse, logician T. Edward Damer calls this *The Principle of Charity* (see [*Attacking Faulty Reasoning*](http://www.amazon.com/Attacking-Faulty-Reasoning-Practical-Fallacy-Free/dp/0495095060/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1219081833&sr=8-1)).

I first heard this principle applied to apologetics by gifted apologist and my friend, the late Bob Passantino. Bob wrote eloquently about [“The Golden Rule Apologetic”](http://www.answers.org/apologetics/goldenapol.html) and he strove to follow it in his many and diverse apologetic encounters.

It isn’t easy to always treat another person’s views with the same care and respect that you want afforded your own. And this is especially true when the person you are dialoguing with refuses to return the favor. But it is critical that Christian apologists strive for these invaluable intellectual virtues. When non-Christians become convinced that believers in Christ prize truth and intellectual honesty above all else, then the power of the Christian apologetic witness will be greatly energized.

In ensuing articles I will address some practical ways in which the Golden Rule of Apologetics can be applied in apologetic encounters.

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3 and 4 of my book, [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

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Subjects: General Apologetics

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I believe deeply that “all truth is God’s truth.” As an RTB scholar I have a great passion to help people understand and see the truth and relevance of Christianity’s truth-claims. [Read more about Kenneth Samples.](http://www.reasons.org/about/who-we-are/kenneth-samples)



Part 2

Two of the most important virtues that a Christian apologist can exhibit are the qualities of intellectual honesty and charity.

In [part one](http://www.reasons.org/articles/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-1) of this series I discussed the biblical ethical principle known as the “Golden Rule.” In [Matthew 7:12], Jesus states:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

While no one keeps the Golden Rule perfectly in life, Christians who are saved by grace ([Titus 3:5](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Titus%203:5;&version=31)) nevertheless need to strive toward this critical moral ideal. And since the Golden Rule applies to every action, it includes the critical enterprise of Christian apologetics (the defense of the faith, [1 Peter 3:15](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%203:15&version=31)).

In an apologetic context, believers ought to treat nonbelievers or fellow believers the way they want to be treated. This includes treating other people’s beliefs, viewpoints, and arguments the way you want yours to be treated. Since we want our beliefs to be handled fairly and respectfully, we owe the same to our apologetic opponents.

The Golden Rule’s application means that Christians should operate according to the highest standards of intellectual integrity. As I stated in Part 1, our enterprise of defending the faith should be characterized by honesty, fairness, civility, and charity.

**The Writings of Others**

Christian apologists should take care not to misrepresent the arguments of others. Those who distort an opponent’s argument engage in the informal logical fallacy known as the [“straw man”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straw_man). All criticisms uttered against a misrepresented argument are logically irrelevant.

One specific application of this rule relates to how we treat what others have written. Apologists should avoid misquoting the works of others. Similarly, taking others’ arguments out of their original and intended written context shows a lack of respect and honesty. Sloppy scholarship severely damages intellectual integrity.

On top of intellectual honesty, we should also endeavor to be charitable to others and state their arguments in the strongest form possible. We may be tempted to interpret what our opponents have written in the worst light possible, but that goes against our fundamental value of fairness. Certainly we would not want our writings treated in this manner. For example, if a critic of Christianity states his argument in a weak or questionable way, give him the benefit of the doubt and respond to the stronger argument.

It isn’t always easy to regard another person’s view with the same care and respect that you want afforded to your own. But it is critical that Christian apologists strive for these invaluable intellectual virtues. When non-Christians become convinced that believers in Christ prize truth and honesty highly, then the power of the Christian apologetic witness will be greatly strengthened.

In ensuing articles I will address some other practical ways in which the Golden Rule of Apologetics can be appropriately applied.

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3 and 4 of my book, [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

Part 3

In his famous play [No Exit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Exit) the French atheistic existential philosopher and writer [Jean-Paul Sartre](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-bio.html) (1905-1980) wrote:

Hell is other people.

Engaging in apologetic discourse sometimes involves talking with people who have very strong opinions and who are not favorably predisposed toward Christianity. A clash of worldview ideas can sometimes result in a confrontational personal encounter. Often people who hold antithetical positions concerning the big philosophical questions of life end up doing little more than simply talking past each other. And after such an encounter we are sometimes left feeling there is an element of truth in Sartre’s description.

In parts [one](http://www.reasons.org/articles/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-1) and [two](http://www.reasons.org/articles/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-2) of this series, I discussed the biblical ethical principle known as the [“Golden Rule.”](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%207:12;&version=31;) This article continues to demonstrate the importance of following this principle while engaging the critical enterprise of Christian apologetics (the defense of the faith, [Jude 3](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jude%203&version=31)).

**The Golden Rule in a Debate**

To be candid, I like to argue. My fellow RTB scholars who regularly meet with me for lunch at Subway can attest to the truth of this admission. I enjoy formulating and presenting logical arguments as well as critiquing the arguments made by others. However, I have to say that I don’t always enjoy it as much when others critique my arguments.

When I’m in the midst of a truly heated dialogue I am usually not concentrating upon understanding in a dispassionate manner my opponent’s argument. Rather I’m thinking about what to say next once he or she stops talking (in order to stay ahead in the debate). I’ll bet many of you “A-type personality” apologists can relate to my somewhat temperamental condition.

Yet I have discovered an application of the Golden Rule that often helps when engaged in such a debate where you and your antagonist seem to be moving in different conceptual directions.

I stop, take a breath, listen carefully to my opponent and then seek to accurately repeat his argument back to him. I will say something like, “Your central claim seems to be \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ and your support for it consists of \_ \_ \_ \_ \_. Now, am I correct in my understanding of your argument?”

Being able to repeat your opponent’s argument usually produces four direct benefits.

First, it ensures that you are not misrepresenting your opponent’s argument (fallacy of the [“straw man”](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straw_man)). You show that you respect them enough to fully consider their case.

Second, people like to know that they have been heard and that their argument has been correctly recognized. They may even be more open to criticism of their argument when they know that you have endeavored to understand their position correctly. Attitude and demeanor directly affect personal persuasion.

Third, you can only effectively criticize an argument when you have a correct understanding of it. By first seeking understanding you inevitably help your subsequent apologetic critique.

Fourth, this practice helps illustrate to your opponent (as well as to others who may be listening) that you care more about understanding truth than you do about winning an intellectual argument.

After getting a handle on what my opponent is genuinely arguing, I will then ask them if they can repeat my argument back to me. Because I have sincerely sought to understand their perspective, they will often attempt to return the favor in kind. And if they cannot or will not, then it becomes quite evident who is really seeking truth in the dispute.

In ensuing articles I will address other ways in which the Golden Rule of apologetics can be applied.

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3 and 4 of my book, [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

Part 4

**Attack the argument, not the person!**

By necessity, any apologetics venture, including that of Christianity, entails critiquing other people’s arguments, positions, and overarching worldviews. Defending the faith often involves clash because two viewpoints that genuinely contradict (negate or deny) one another cannot both be true. The [Law of Noncontradiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_noncontradiction) states that “A cannot equal A and equal non-A.”

Unfortunately, when you strongly disagree with someone over a critical issue it is easy to lose sight of that person’s argument and instead attack or impugn the person’s character. This human proclivity illustrates man’s flaws of both mind and moral fiber.

In logic, assaulting an opponent’s character is considered an informal fallacy known as the [ad hominem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ad_hominem) or “attack against the man.” If a person’s character is not the logical issue at hand, then any appeal to character-related issues is logically irrelevant. Even morally flawed people can present cogent logical arguments.

The Golden Rule exhorts us as Christians to treat other people the way we want to be treated ([Matthew 7:12](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%207:12&version=31)). And since this ethical principle applies to every action, it includes the enterprise of apologetics ([1 Peter 3:15-17](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%203:15-17;&version=31;)). In an apologetic context, the Christian needs to treat other people’s beliefs, viewpoints, and arguments the way they want theirs treated; recognizing, of course, that no one keeps this rule perfectly and that believers are saved solely by God’s unmerited favor (“grace”) in Christ ([Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:5](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%202:8-10;%20Titus%203:5;&version=31;)).

**Avoiding the Ad Hominem Fallacy**

As forgiven sinners, Christians are certainly not immune to engaging in “name-calling” or impugning the character (or motives) of others. However, to steer clear of this fallacious practice during an apologetic encounter involves intellectual concentration and moral discipline. When critiquing the position of an opponent**, stay focused on the central argument at** **hand.** Realize that uncovering the truth of an issue is itself a noble task. And arguing cogently and fairly is certainly much more important that winning an argument by appealing to illegitimate and/or dishonest tactics.

If you are the victim of an ad hominem attack while engaged in an apologetic debate, resist the temptation to respond in kind. Rather, **clearly identify the irrelevant attack on the part of your challenger.** Then you can refocus the discussion by getting the discourse back to the logically relevant issue.

Often times those listening to the discussion will appreciate the care and fairness that you have exhibited and will be more open to your viewpoint. Even your opponent may be positively impacted by your show of intellectual integrity.

**Remember, attitude and demeanor may carry as much weight toward ultimate persuasion as do the apologetic arguments themselves (**[**1 Peter 3:15**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%203:15&version=31)**).**

Ensuing articles will address other ways in which the Golden Rule of Apologetics can be appropriately applied.

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3-4 of my book [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

Part 5

I find it very frustrating at times to watch television programs aired on the History Channel or the Discovery Channel where liberal and/or secular scholars tend to misrepresent historic Christianity.

It is also hard for me to watch the critics of Christianity present my faith in the worst light possible without attempting to be fair and objective in their presentation. Therefore, I admire scholars of all stripes who are careful, measured, and who work hard at being objective in their analysis, especially when it comes to evaluating the beliefs of others.

The Golden Rule enunciated by Jesus himself asserts that we must seek to “do to others what you would have them do to you” ([Matthew 7:12](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%207:12&version=31)). And since this ethical principle covers all actions, it applies to Christian apologetics ([1 Peter 3:15-17](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%203:15-17;&version=31;)).

All apologetics efforts include critiquing other people’s arguments, positions, and overarching worldviews. Therefore as a Christian apologist, I feel an obligation to work hard to fairly represent any alternative system of belief that I explore and critique. Just as I don’t want my faith to be misrepresented, so I need to treat other people’s beliefs with appropriate care and respect.

Throughout my apologetic endeavors I have developed six practices that ensure that I handle my opponents’ opinions and views with evenhandedness. We’ll explore two in this article and four more in future installments. I hope that you will find these practices useful in your own apologetics ventures.

**Six Practices of Apologetic Fairness**

1. Identify Central Tenets of a Belief System---Understand the position that you are critiquing (for example, naturalism or postmodernism) well enough to be able to correctly identify the very essence of the system. Knowing the heart of a belief system helps enormously to achieve accurate representation. And a critique is always most effective when the essence is identified and engaged apologetically. I certainly appreciate it when non-Christians have taken the time to familiarize themselves with the central tenets of historic Christianity.

2. Affirm Positive Features of a Belief System---Every worldview system evinces strengths and weaknesses. It is important to identify the positives as well as the negatives. It expresses objectivity when a person weighs and evaluates the strong and weak elements of a formal system of belief.

For example, the Eastern worldview of pantheistic-monism while having profound problems, including lack of coherence, explanatory power, and correspondence, nevertheless has some positive features as well. This mystical religious perspective affirms the existence of a spiritual reality and values such concepts as unity and justice. Identifying these positive features can serve as a bridge for Christians to utilize in discussing this worldview with its many adherents. Additionally, in terms of personal persuasion, people are more likely to listen carefully to the negative critique when they have first heard you enumerate the positive features.

Accurately representing a system’s core beliefs as well as identifying both its positive and negative features goes a long way in helping Christian apologists to perform their critical task with intellectual integrity and charity.

In ensuing articles I will continue my discussion of the “Six Practices of Apologetic Fairness.”

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3-4 of my book [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

Part 6

What can Christian apologists do to represent the arguments of others with fairness and intellectual integrity?

This series has focused upon the need to apply the biblical principle of the Golden Rule to the enterprise of Christian apologetics. In [Matthew 7:12](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%207:12&version=31), Jesus states this critical moral maxim as follows:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Since the Golden Rule applies to all endeavors in life, as believers we should strive to treat the viewpoints of others with care and evenhandedness. We certainly want to be treated that way.

**Six Practices for Apologetic Fairness**

In [part five](http://www.reasons.org/articles/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-5) of this series, I began a list of practices that an apologist can implement to ensure a respectful critique of the opposition’s perspective. Here are the two points covered last time:

1. Identify Central Tenets of a Belief System.
2. Affirm Positive Features of a Belief System.

Now let’s examine two more points in this article.

3. Quote the Most Authoritative Sources.---Since I appreciate it when critics of my faith quote the best and most authoritative sources when examining historic Christianity, I owe them the same in return. It is important for Christian apologists to study the belief system in question so well as to know its most respected sources.

When critiquing naturalism in my book [*A World of Difference*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference), I used quotes from well-respected philosophical sources that were fair in their basic, though critical, assessment. I also resourced respected texts written by naturalists themselves for explaining and defending their worldview. The point here is to refer to quality sources that represent the critiqued position in an objective and fair fashion.

4. Give the Critiqued Belief System the Benefit of the Doubt.---When examining the positions of others, read their views in the best light possible. For example, if a weak version of an argument is given, explain that there is a stronger version to that same argument and then proceed to critique the stronger position.

When I examine the theological positions of other Christian traditions, I make it a point to give some grace to my Christian brothers and sisters and frame their position in the most positive and charitable way possible. I like to think of myself as a “charitable Calvinist.” Treating the views of others with fairness and respect gives evidence of true intellectual integrity. God’s servants should perform the apologetic task with the goal of prizing truth and respecting people.

The last article in this series will conclude my discussion of the “Six Practices for Apologetic Fairness.”

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3 - 4 of my book [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).

Part 7

According to Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the rules of reasoning carry with them *moral implications*.

The father of logic, Aristotle viewed proper reasoning as ordered thought. Through careful, logical reasoning a person could arrive at rational and truthful conclusions. He concluded that the “truth” about reality cannot be separated from the moral “good.”

Christians also believe that truth cannot be separated from moral goodness. Thus, apologetic engagement should be characterized by a sense of fair play and evenhandedness on the apologist’s behalf. Christians should prize and pursue truth at all costs, but that means a commitment to intellectual integrity. It is more important to apprehend the truth than to win an argument, especially when the winning is done in a specious way.

In parts [5](http://www.reasons.org/tnrtb/2008/10/14/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-5-of-7/) and [6](http://www.reasons.org/tnrtb/2008/10/21/the-golden-rule-of-apologetics-part-6-of-7/) of this series, I explored four of the six practices for apologetic fairness:

**Six Practices for Apologetic Fairness**

1. Identify Central Tenets of a Belief System. 2. Affirm Positive Features of a Belief System. 3. Quote the Most Authoritative Sources. 4. Give the Critiqued Belief System the Benefit of the Doubt.

In wrapping up the series on the golden rule of apologetics, I want to discuss two final points that can help believers exhibit fair-mindedness.

5. Allow a Review of Your Analysis.--Some sixteen years ago I coauthored a book entitled [*The Cult of the Virgin*](http://www.amazon.com/Cult-Virgin-Catholic-Mariology-Apparitions/dp/0801062918/ref=sr%3Cem%3E1%3C/em%3E1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1219183013&sr=1-1) . This book examined the Roman Catholic view of the Virgin Mary from a Protestant evangelical perspective. Desiring to be fair in my critique of Catholic beliefs, I suggested to my coauthor that we ask a Roman Catholic scholar to write a response to our book within its pages.

Some Protestants were greatly disturbed that we let a Catholic respond to our work. However, I thought it was a bold step in attempting to achieve scholarly fairness. In the process I learned a great deal about Catholicism by interacting with a friend who is a Jesuit scholar. And I think the readers of our book greatly benefited from our attempt at evenhandedness. I, therefore, strongly recommend that Christian apologists get input from the people who hold the positions that they are critiquing.

6. List Sources that Defend the Critiqued Belief System.--Another way to strive toward fairness is to make sure your analysis of other systems includes a list of sources that aggressively defend the thesis you are critiquing. Citing the best sources on the other side of the apologetic divide shows you are aware of the best arguments against your position and are willing to encourage others to examine them. This models the principle of fair play and honesty.

It is not easy to follow these practices to ensure apologetic fairness. Maybe we should view them as ideals to strive toward. Sometimes you may be able to accomplish only a couple of them. But they are worth working toward.

Striving to keep the golden rule of apologetics can help Christians focus on intellectual integrity. Apologetics is a challenging enterprise but it is a necessary venture and can produce fruitful results, especially when it is done with integrity and with a winsome spirit.

For more on building intellectual virtue in the area of apologetics, see chapters 3-4 of my book [*A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*](http://www.reasons.org/catalog/world-difference).